

ANYONE OF YOUR KIN

Leviticus 19:16-18

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 25, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

You shall not go around as a [gossip] among your people, and you shall not [stand by over] the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

Leading up to Labor Day, Maggie and I spent nearly three weeks in Maine, most of it on Swan's Island, near the entrance to Acadia National Park. The island is home to about 300 people, mainly lobster men and women. Because it was late in the season, when many of the summer people had left, and, we surmised, because this was our tenth year to visit, we seemed to be more recognized and accepted by the year-round residents.

We talked to one of the old timers, a stalwart leader of the community, who now walks with a walker. He was in his car outside the small store that serves as the island's heartbeat, waiting for the kind owner to gather his weekly groceries and bring them to him so as to spare him having to navigate the store's narrow aisle with his walker. The man pointed to the vacant lot behind the store where his one-room schoolhouse had stood. When he learned we were from Virginia, he told us of being stationed at Ft. Belvoir as a young soldier. He said he had been disappointed when, after basic training, he was assigned there, rather than a base where many of his other enlistees were sent. "I just wasn't as smart as the guys from the mainland," he said.

Now over the years we have watched this man preside over contentious town hall meetings, work with others to make a decision to sell the citizen-owned electrical cooperative to the local utility company, support a ten-year project of renovating the lighthouse, be involved with efforts to bring broadband to the island, and take tickets at the Sunday morning Oddfellow's Pancake Breakfasts.

He told us he didn't read books, but that he learned what he learned from watching nature and people. But still he said, "I wasn't as smart as the people from the mainland." After the service, he couldn't wait to return to the island where he has spent his life ever since.

Whenever we return from Maine, some of you ask what books I read on vacation. This year both Maggie and I had fewer impending projects, so we slept more, hiked and relaxed more. I only read one major book. Its title is *The Hidden Order of Intimacy*, which may sound like a racy novel, but its subtitle is *Reflections on the Book of Leviticus*.¹ Yes, Leviticus.

¹ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Hidden Order of Intimacy: Reflections on the Book of Leviticus* (New York: Schocken Books, 2022).

Most people who try to read the Bible cover to cover, stumble on this third book of the Bible, if indeed they make it through Genesis and Exodus. Leviticus has sections² on:

- Voluntary Sacrifices
- Mandatory Sacrifices
- Special Sacrificial Instructions for the Priests
- Special Sacrificial Instructions for the People
- Clean and Unclean
- The Day of Atonement
- The Holiness Code

For centuries we Christians have been taught that we have been set free from the Old Testament Law and from any excessive rules and regulations about worship. As a book of Law, with many prescriptions for worship, Leviticus is not a Biblical book to which we are inclined to turn.

II.

But right in the middle of the book lies a sentence we know by heart: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*. This fragment of a verse – consisting of only *three* Hebrew words – is, as we saw last Sunday, the second part of what Jesus labelled the Greatest Commandment:

You shall love the Lord your God
with *all* your heart,
and with *all* your soul,
and with *all* your mind.³

And

You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

This verse has become a classic for Jews and Christians. It is clear, simple, and direct. It doesn't involve doctrine or worship or church government. Rather, it describes what we are to do in the world outside those unique functions of religious life. This aspect of the Greatest Commandment appeals to us because we can love our neighbor at any stage or any age, whether, like our friend on the island, we feel intelligent or not, whether we are stationed far away from home or living in the familiar confines in which we were reared. "Love your neighbor as yourself."

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Over the centuries, these three Hebrew words have given rise to Jews and Christians feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless.

- Inspired by these words, we have sought to end wars and return POWs.

² These are the basic divisions as labelled in the *New Revised Standard Version*.

³ Deuteronomy 6:1-9.

- We have sought to protect the world and its people from of climate crises, disease, malnutrition, poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, tyranny, genocide, and totalitarianism.
- Inspired by this commandment, we have sought
 - To abolish slavery
 - Extend suffrage
 - Prevent lynching
 - Reform prisons
 - Improve working conditions
 - Care for the aged, infirmed, disabled, mentally ill
 - Build orphanages and academies in Africa and homes in Appalachia
 - Support work among children and young and college students on Indian reservations in North Dakota
- These words have led us to
 - Welcome the immigrant
 - Accept people who differ from us in matters of sexual orientation or gender identity
 - And at our best to seek to understand the moral reasoning and respect the conscience of people who are pro-life and people who are pro-choice.
- Even closer to home, the words “love thy neighbor” call to our minds individuals we know who have devoted the better part of their lives to the daily care of another human being:
 - a disabled child
 - a spouse or parent with Alzheimer’s
 - a sibling or close friend who has had a stroke.

When I hear these words, I see the faces of parents of severely disabled children and youth in churches I have served – Ed and Martha Dale Stock, Roy and Linda Case, Bonnie and Herb Neubauer, the Sandra Raymond – some of whom are no longer living; and I see the faces of several of you in this Sanctuary who are doing or have done the same thing. You do love your neighbor – “anyone of your kin” – as yourself.

IV.

But lest we be naïve or unrealistic, as important as this verse is to us, it remains contrary to human nature: a fact the Biblical writers did not hide.

- One of the first cries raised in Scripture comes a few chapters into Genesis: “Am I my brother’s keeper?”⁴
- In one of the most famous parables of Jesus, a man who is beaten, robbed, and left for dead has to watch two religious officials pass him by before a foreigner, a stranger, a Samaritan stops to nurse his wounds.⁵

⁴ Genesis 4:9.

⁵ Luke 10:25-37.

- Jesus himself says, “The poor you will always have with you,”⁶ and Paul even writes, “Let those who don’t work not eat.”⁷

When Freud labelled “love of neighbor” as “un-psychological,”⁸ he was on to something.

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Furthermore, the *immediate* context in which the commandment appears exposes the degree to which love toward even those closest to us may not be our default position.⁹ In the verses immediately prior to the commandment, God has *observed* what we are prone to do and specified what we are *not* do:

- *You shall not go around as a slanderer [or gossip] among your people*
- *You shall not stand over the blood of your neighbor [without doing something to help]*
- *You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin*
- *You shall not incur guilt upon yourself by failing to reprove your neighbor.*

And finally:

- *You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people.*

Last week, we said that the Hebrew understanding of loving God “with all our heart” means loving God with both sides of our hearts: the side that contains the beautiful and the positive, as well as the side that contains the less beautiful and negative.¹⁰ Likewise, even and especially in our closest relationships, we must honestly confront that which divides and stands between us and our neighbor so that out of that conversation – as difficult as it is – our relationship with our neighbor might continue, and that we might even find a deeper respect for those with whom we disagree or from whom we are different.

Blake once wrote:

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe;
I told it not, my wrath did grow...¹¹

IV.

⁶ Matthew 26:11 and Mark 14:7.

⁷ II Thessalonians 3:10.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 79, originally published in 1930; quoted in Zornberg 173.

⁹ Zornberg 172.

¹⁰ Larry R. Hayward, “With All Your Heart,” a sermon at Westminster Presbyterian Church, September 18, 2022, available at <https://storage.sermon.net/96d4b233944b8f8d8142e283b3222565/632f526a-1501daf-1/content/media/103210/Sermon%20Text%2009.18.22%20LH.pdf>.

¹¹ William Blake, “A Poison Tree,” written in 1794, quoted in Zornberg 174.

As much as we associate love of neighbor with those who are needy – the man on the side of the road – we can never overlook loving the neighbor close at hand – “anyone of our kin” who is different from us that is suddenly part of our circle.

The place we are most likely to learn such empathy is within our relationships like family, marriage, love, friendship, work, school, church. Because developing empathy is a lifelong quest, we often learn it best from those with whom we spend most of our lives. This is true particularly when those relationship might involve someone we might initially dismiss as strange, different, “other.”

Philosopher Eric Santer writes:

Only from the center does there arise a *bounded* home in an *unbounded* world, a *patch of ground* between *four tent pegs* that can be posted *further and further out*.¹²

How many of us have had our hearts and minds changed – overnight or overtime – when one who is radically different from us – who is a stranger to us – has emerged within our family?

Through our interaction with this person – this stranger, this one who is different than us, this newcomer – how many of us have moved the tent pegs a little further out on the path of ground which is our home? How many of us have learned a little empathy through coming to know the stranger “among our kin”?

V.

One final and crucial point: Avivah Zornberg, the author of the one book I read on vacation, writes:

In our obligations to the [neighbor], we open ourselves also to the idea of God as present within this paradoxical love of the neighbor...[Within] the concrete dimensions of living *in the midst of life* we *recognize* the presence of God...¹³

In a famous but sometimes misunderstood quote, Sartre closed his play *No Exit* with the words: “Hell is other people.”¹⁴ While at times we all feel this, the deeper truth is that “God is other people” or at least “God is within other people.” When we encounter others, we catch a glimpse of their uniqueness and distinctiveness, we catch a glimpse of ourselves, and we catch a glimpse of God working within us all.

Amen.

¹² Eric Santer, *On the Psychology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 45; quoted in Zornberg 16.

¹³ Zornberg 178.

¹⁴ See <https://www.the-philosophy.com/sartre-hell-is-other-people>.